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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001437

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL NI SL LI ECOWAS
SUBJECT: ECOWAS: KOUYATE ASKS ADVICE ON TAYLOR -- ANY GOOD
EXIT STRATEGIES?

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter, reason 1.5 (B/D).

¶11. (C) This is an action message; see paragraph 11.

¶12. (C) Summary. ECOWAS Executive Secretary Kouyate invited Ambassador to his office June 18 to discuss President Taylor of Liberia and the regional response to Taylor's government. Kouyate suggested either an attempt at an "internal dialogue" consisting of prominent Liberians interacting with Taylor on national reconciliation, or pressure toward early Presidential elections. He agreed that any ECOWAS effort toward "dialogue" could be easily manipulated by Taylor, and arouse great suspicion by Conte of Guinea (who was in "direct contact" with Liberian dissidents operating on the border, said Kouyate). Kouyate also agreed that early elections would also be problematic; Taylor exercised such tight control over the Liberian state, a free and fair process would be unlikely. Evincing considerable frustration and uncertainty, Kouyate acknowledged that "no one has an answer to Taylor." On reflection, we believe that an "internal dialogue" of credible Liberian parties, held in Abuja and specifically excluding Taylor, would send the Liberian President a strong message and foster greater cohesion within the opposition. We will commend this course of action to Kouyate and to the GON unless Washington or Monrovia state objections. End Summary.

¶13. (C) ECOWAS Executive Secretary Lansana Kouyate invited Ambassador to his office on short notice June 18 to discuss President Taylor of Liberia and potential regional responses to his government. Kouyate told Ambassador upon arrival that President Konare of Mali was due in later that afternoon to discuss Taylor with Nigerian President Obasanjo. Kouyate had been invited to sit in on the meeting. "They will ask me for my opinion," said Kouyate, "and I would like yours."

¶14. (C) In describing regional attitudes generally to Taylor and the situation in Liberia, Kouyate said: "We are in a waiting mode." Taylor continued to claim that dissident forces inside Liberia had been supplied with "British" arms, that he had proof of this, and that this proved British and American efforts to overthrow him. Kouyate dismissed these claims, but noted the continuing efforts by Taylor to manipulate regional opinion and cast himself and his government as victims. One possible avenue away from the present unpleasant reality of a recalcitrant Taylor and continuing pressure from the international community, said Kouyate, would be some form of "internal dialogue" consisting of prominent Liberians, inside and outside the country, interacting with the Taylor government. A preliminary list of participants had been drawn up by Togba-nah Tipoteh, a leading dissident political activist. Another possibility would be early elections in Liberia, with the hope if not the expectation that Taylor would lose. "We need to find an exit for Charles Taylor," said Kouyate. (Comment: Tipoteh just spent three days in Abuja, and called twice on President Obasanjo, an old friend from their days together in the African Leadership Forum. Tipoteh also met with the Ambassador and complained bitterly about Taylor's authoritarian ways. He also said that Taylor continues his support for the RUF, including harboring Sam Bocherie, whom he claims is still in Nigeria, based at Camp Nama. End comment).

¶15. (C) Kouyate agreed with Ambassador that early elections would hardly be free and fair given the tight grip Taylor exercised over all organs of government, including his feared security services. He equally agreed that any form of "dialogue" with prominent Liberians could be easily manipulated, particularly if it occurred inside Liberia. Any guarantees from Taylor on the return of prominent exiles could not be trusted. He noted that Konare had asked him several times to go to Monrovia and meet with Taylor, and each time he "resisted," arguing that a trip to Liberia with no important change or concession in prospect would be pointless, if not counter-productive. Taylor's motivations would always be suspect in any attempt at reconciliation, and Taylor would never share power or agree to step down

peacefully, he acknowledged. Ambassador advised that any effort at dialogue should be done outside the country to limit Taylor's ability to manipulate, divide, and perhaps even harm participants.

¶ 16. (C) Kouyate also freely acknowledged that any move toward "dialogue" with Taylor could be easily misinterpreted by President Conte of Guinea, who would assume that an unearned rehabilitation of Taylor would result, with no gain for regional peace and security, particularly on his border with Liberia. Conte, whom Kouyate said was in "direct contact" with Liberian dissidents on the border, had to be in agreement or efforts at reconciliation would fail. In a side note, Kouyate agreed that Alhaji Kromah, now travelling in the region and seeking a hearing and support from regional interlocutors, was hardly a factor within his own ULIMO faction these days, and that Conte had much the greater influence. In fact, Conte believed that the current offensive against Taylor would finish the Liberian President, evidenced by his recent remark to Kouyate that "this time we have him (Taylor)."

¶ 17. (C) Kouyate argued that the Nigerian Government was no less committed to continuing pressure on Taylor than the international community. He noted that Ambassador Ralph Uwuechwe, Obasanjo's Advisor for Conflict Reconciliation, had made an unhelpful statement (saying, in effect, that Nigerian does not support sanctions). But it was not at all clear that Uwuechwe's statement represented the GON position on the issue. Further, Kouyate could not recall a single time, when Obasanjo met face to face with Taylor, when the two men did not violently disagree. "Obasanjo knows who he is dealing with," said Kouyate. Nigeria was never against sanctions Kouyate said, but he did harbor the belief that the threat of sanctions would be more effective.

¶ 18. (C) Kouyate noted that French Foreign Minister Vedrine would visit Nigeria at the end of the month, and this would be a good opportunity to seek a common policy on Taylor with the French. Both Obasanjo and Kouyate would see Vedrine and look for common positions. Ambassador interjected that accelerated timber sales from Liberia now constituted a key component of Taylor's revenue stream, and timber sales had been excluded from sanctions at French request. This needed to be brought up. (Comment: Kouyate has noted before that he also looks to the U.S. to put pressure on the French to desist from GOF support for Taylor. End comment).

¶ 19. (C) Kouyate closed by saying that the present political and economic situation in Liberia was "terrible," and the prospect of more refugees and internally displaced persons would only grow. Sanctions had not been intended to hurt the average Liberian, but they were hurting them, he implied. While there was no point to dialogue with Taylor that only divided ECOWAS, and thereby helped Taylor, some effort needed to be made.

¶ 10. (C) Comment. Kouyate, normally confident in his opinions and incisive in his analyses, appeared to us to be genuinely at a loss for workable solutions, and seeking advice for a difficult situation for which he has no ready answers. He also seemed well aware of the potential for decisions by ECOWAS regarding Taylor that could be unhelpful, if not downright counter-productive. The USG will need to be sensitive to the urge toward "solutions" within ECOWAS while focusing on the specific problems of any potential initiatives. We look forward to a read-out from Kouyate on the Obasanjo/Konare meeting. End comment.

¶ 11. (C) On reflection, we believe that an "internal dialogue" involving credible Liberian political players could be a welcome development. This dialogue should pointedly exclude Taylor and should take place outside of Liberia, perhaps in Abuja if the Nigerians agree. A dialogue excluding Taylor should not alienate Conte and would send the Liberian President a message that the region is willing to engage his opposition, particularly those with democratic credentials. The Embassy proposes to recommend this course of action to ECOWAS and to the Nigerian government, if Washington and Embassy Monrovia perceive no objection. Please advise.